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How the ideal of a thin body harms Hong Kong women and girls

Su-Mei Thompson and Jess Jacobson say self-confidence can help women and girls realise that a slim body is not the ultimate gauge of beauty

Su-Mei Thompson and Jess Jacobson

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Our billboards, TV programmes and social media sites all create and reinforce the belief that thinness equates to beauty. Photo: K. Y. Cheng

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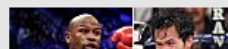
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Last week, France joined Italy, Spain and Israel in announcing a ban on ultra thin models whose body mass index falls below a certain level. The French legislators were influenced by the fact that anorexia affects 40,000 people in France, with women and girls comprising nine out of 10 victims.

We see this as a much-needed "reset" for the fashion industry which has seen models become ever more emaciated, while advertising campaigns for leading fashion and skincare brands air-brush images of already thin models to make them even thinner.

This is important because the ramifications of the thinness ideal don't just affect models. The impact on the rest of society is massive and hugely detrimental to the physical and mental health of women and girls.

Hong Kong needs to pay more attention to this issue. Our billboards, TV programmes and social media sites all create and reinforce the belief that thinness equates to beauty. The fact that 30 per cent of the pages of our entertainment magazines carry slimming advertisements directed at women underscores the pressure to conform.

Since women are continuously comparing and benchmarking themselves against air-brushed images, their ever present inner voice constantly reminds them they need to have a flatter stomach, more pert breasts, more shapely legs and flawless skin. But what is frightening is that how women think they look often bears no relation to reality. We know this from the Dove "Real Beauty" campaigns and other studies. In 2012, the Hong Kong Eating Disorder Association reported that among women trying to lose weight, 10 per cent were actually underweight and 60 per cent were normal weight.

The same study found that eating disorders are increasing exponentially in Hong Kong and the number of individuals between 20 and 29 who are clinically underweight doubled from 1995 to 2010. This has very significant ramifications for our health system, given that eating disorders can lead to malnutrition, osteoporosis and organ failure.

In terms of mental outlook, up to 50 per cent of those with eating disorders meet the criteria for depression. Low self-esteem can hold girls back. Research shows that six out of 10 will not to do something because they don't want to draw attention to how they look, including not engaging in classroom debate or even turning up to school at all.

While the new regulations in France may alleviate the pressure on female models, we can all do much more to bring about the necessary sea change in societal attitudes that will allow women and girls to be their best selves. This includes educating our girls for self-confidence - for instance, how to deal with teasing and bullying - to instil in them the belief that how we look is just one part of our identity. We can all also be much better role models by watching our language and ensuring we focus on actions and values rather than looks when complimenting others, and being thoughtful about the kind of photos we post on Facebook. We need to work together to address the broader issues and to ensure low body self-esteem doesn't continue to harm the health and prospects of our women and girls.

Su-Mei Thompson is CEO and Jess Jacobson is programme and campaign manager at The Women's Foundation. This article is part of a monthly column on women's and gender issues developed in collaboration with the foundation

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